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ABSTRACT

An update on current research and best practices in language learning, this brochure is intended for parents, business persons, teachers, school administrators, legislators, and others interested in elementary school programs and practices. It notes that important changes in the understanding of language learning have occurred due to extensive research in the past few decades, and that as a consequence, ideas about how to best teach children have changed as well. The brochure explains these new ideas, many of which may be different from those its readers remember, with the hope that the brochure will help its readers better understand and recognize ways in which elementary teachers are incorporating these new ideas in their classroom practice. It considers nine new interrelated ideas about the kinds of experiences that foster children's language learning, and describes what they might look like in the classroom. (SR)

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ED 450 387

Elementary School Practices

NCTE Guidelines & Position Statements

A brochure for parents, business persons, teachers, school administrators, legislators, and others interested in elementary school programs and practices

Current Research on Language Learning from the Committee on School Practices and Programs of the National Council of Teachers of English

New Research . . . New Practice!

Teachers Are Implementing Current

Research on Language Learning

Changes in our understanding of language learning have occurred in the past few decades due to extensive language research. Naturally, as we make new discoveries about language--reading, writing, and speaking--and how it is learned, our ideas about how we can best teach children change as well.

The aim of this brochure is to explain these new ideas--many of which may be different from ones you may know or remember from your own schooling experiences. We hope that the brochure will help you better understand and recognize the ways in which elementary teachers are incorporating these new ideas in their classroom prac- tice.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

New Research Means New Practice!

We used to think . . .

that in order for children to learn to read and write whole texts, they had to learn the smallest parts of language first. Because of this "part-to-whole" belief, it made sense to first teach kids letter names, then "sounds" that letters make, then introduce them to simple words and short sentences. We spent a good

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deal of time working on what we thought were prerequisite skills to reading and writing.

Though many children learned to read and write under these conditions, many did not. In fact, such instruction made it difficult for most children to understand the joy and benefit of reading and writing--to make them lifetime readers and writers.

We now know that . . .

learning to read and learning to write are a lot like learning to talk. We would think it funny if parents hovered over their newborn's crib, chanting the sounds of language one at a time. Parents are not trying to teach language, but rather trying to communicate with their child. They do not teach children individual sounds, but instead, use and share language naturally as a part of everyday experiences. They re- spect and accept their baby's babblings as talk. Although different from that of grown-ups, the child's language is celebrated and accepted without criticism. It is through constant interaction with family and friends--through using language and hearing others use it in everyday situations--that children learn to talk. Our research has indicated that the same is true of learning to read and write. It is through constant interaction with family and friends. teachers and classmates-- through using reading and writing and observing others reading and writing in everyday situations--that children can learn to read and write.

From Research to Practice

Our new interest . . .

in learning language by using it suggests many important changes for schools. We now recognize the importance of creating classrooms where childrenþs "work" looks more like the natural learning that they do at home. Research has helped us identify the kinds of experiences that foster children's language learning.

Let's consider nine new interrelated ideas about these experiences, and what they might look like in practice in classrooms where teachers are supporting children in learning language.

New Ideas to Consider

1. Rather than trying to memorize facts. as just facts, children learn best when they have opportunities to use language to connect new information with what they already know.

Teachers will often begin the study of a topic by talking and brainstorming with children to find out what they already know. Teachers will also invite children to think about the questions they want answers for. This kind of active involvement on the part of children assures that what they are learning connects with and builds upon what they already know--it makes the learning of facts meaningful.

2. Rather than just listening to or taking notes from teachers' lectures or textbooks, children learn best when they are using language purposefully--talking with one another and with the teacher to understand themselves and their experiences, and reading and writing for a reason: to learn about what they find interesting and to share it with others.

Teachers do not want children to parrot back teachers' or textbooks' wordings. Instead, they invite discussion so that children can talk about topics in their own ways. Lively and productive conversations are encouraged. Through these interactions, teachers can also tell a great deal about what their students know, and determine what they need to know.

3. Rather than sitting at their desks filling up pages in workbooks, children learn best when they are working on meaningful projects--actively involved in experiments or explorations on a range of topics that interest them.

For example, instead of just reading about plants, children might grow their own seedlings, examine the reactions of the young plants to different soils, light sources, and amounts of water. These kinds of experiences provide opportunities for students to read, write, talk, and listen like real botanists.

4. Rather than working on subjects in isolation from one another, studying reading apart from writing, and apart from math, science, social studies, and other curricular areas, children learn best when they are engaged in inquiries that involve using language to learn, and that naturally incorporate content from a variety of subject areas.

For instance, in a study of their own state, teachers might ask children to generate a list of questions that would guide their individual research. Some children may be interested in the

state's wildlife and environmental problems: some in its history; others in why farmers in the state are struggling;

others in the tornadoes that occur each spring. The interest group studying tornadoes, for example, will need to consider the scientific principles that explain how and why tornadoes exist, the history of where exactly tornadoes have occurred, how people have dealt with the ruin that tornadoes have caused, the statistics of death and destruction, and so forth. As children conduct their research, they use many resources--interviews, brochures, maps, magazines, newspapers, and books. Thus, in answering their questions, they read, write, and talk to learn. This learning naturally integrates the use of resources from various subject areas.

5. Rather than establishing a curricular scope and sequence that requires all children of a given age, grade, or classroom to learn the same things in the same ways, children learn best when they are provided choices or options about the activities and projects they engage in.

In studying a topic or unit, such as studying their own state, children can easily be kept interested and involved when they have chosen their topics within the larger unit. Further, children's choices about how to share what they have learned-- how to use writing, art, drama, demonstration--provide a richer, in-depth understanding of the state's economics, culture, geography, and wildlife than just studying a textbook can provide.

6. Rather than insisting that children work in isolation, children learn best when they have the opportunity to interact with one another and to talk with each other about their ideas.

Teachers provide situations where children are able to talk and work with their peers so they can get critical feedback from each other. These conversations give children opportunities to learn from interpretations that are different from their own. When others ask them questions, children begin to see themselves as experts. Those questions can often challenge children to think even more deeply about the things they know. Diversity among students is considered an advantage because it enables children to learn about the many different ways their friends approach and solve problems. And through it all, a feeling of community and cooperation is created

in the classroom.

7. Rather than rigidly placing children into groups according to abilities, children learn best when they can participate in a variety of groups based on choice and activities.

   Teachers use flexible grouping, where children participate in different kinds of groups throughout their day. Recall the earlier example where children studying their home state formed research groups based upon the questions they found most interesting. At other times in the day, these children are involved in other groups for different reasons--perhaps to study a different subject or discuss a book they have all read, perhaps to get some help from the teacher on a particular need they have in math, reading, or writing. Through flexible groups, children have lots of opportunities to see other learners' styles of problem-solving. Everyone is enriched through the process.

8. Teachers understand that "mistakes," or approximations, such as those seen in Kyle's letter below, are a natural part of learning, and they expect them to occur. But they know to appreciate what children do well. Kyle and his first-grade classmates had decided to write to Bessie, a teacher's aide who had moved. Kyle's writing reveals a lot--his understanding of the kind of information found in letters and a sensitivity to the news Bessie would find interesting. Aware that Bessie's birthday was coming up, Kyle also weaves the traditional birthday song into his letter. He even uses a broken heart to convey how much he misses her. Kyle's letter provides useful information about his present thinking about language and the world. Understanding Kyle's thinking helps his teacher plan appropriate instruction to help Kyle expand and extend those understandings.

   Kyle's letter, which was later mailed to Bessie, reveals a lot about his current thinking about language and the world.

9. Rather than relying to a large degree on standardized tests to determine children's educational progress and achievement, children learn best when assessments are related to their own everyday ongoing work--when they have opportunities to evaluate their own performance and learning, and receive feedback about their work from peers and their teachers.

Many teachers are using "portfolios," like those that artists compile, to document children's progress. These collections of children's best work include in- formation about not just the finished products, but also documentation about how children went about creating these items and what children themselves think about them. These collections of children's work assist teachers in knowing how to help children, and perhaps just as important, they provide wonderful evidence for children and their parents of all the unique growth they have achieved.

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